

and we have to salvage what we can as we can. In *Catchworld* destiny itself can't escape — we will defy it and become its master. We can do it, too, inside our heads, in the universe of the mind.

And this is why these stories are archetypal.

As we live out lives in the grip of twentieth-century reality, retreating further and further into our private lives, sustained by our machines for living in and finding out that other people are really quite alien and not necessary to our lives save in some peculiar abstract sense, what kind of myths are we likely to build? Myths to dramatise our situation, and myths to show us how to cope with it — what else?

I congratulate the judges of the competition wholeheartedly on their having achieved such a remarkably appropriate result.

## you wouldn't like oregon

**Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH**

by Robert C. O'Brien (*Puffin, 1975, 197pp, £0.30, ISBN 0 1403 0725 7, first published Gollancz, 1972*)

**Z for Zachariah**

by Robert C. O'Brien (*Gollancz, 1975, 192pp, £1.75, ISBN 0 575 01890 9*)

reviewed by Ursula K. Le Guin

There is generally someone in the room who announces that he "can't stand books with talking animals in them"? And I always wonder why he sounds so pleased with himself, as if some high virtue were hidden in his lamentable prejudice. Anyhow, this person may go elsewhere to pretend that he is not a talking animal, and need not read *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*.

Mrs. Frisby is a mouse. The other characters in the book are mice, rats, an owl, humans, a shrew, etc. NIMH, though it is never spelled out in the book, is the (American) National Institute of Mental Health.

Now rats are much used in laboratories, for experiments on intelligence among other things: and extremely intelligent rats might escape from the laboratory as a group . . . In other words, the book is science fiction, in that a coherent and ingenious explanation is given for the rats' behaviour: their brains and longevity have been artificially, genetically, enhanced. However, the wild, unenhanced animals, though illiterate, talk as well as the rats do, and are inclined to an unusual degree of interspecies cooperation; so that everybody in the book, owls, mice and humans, ends up seeming pretty much the same sort — as in *The Wind in the Willows*, or *Watership Down*. This combination of traditional deep fantasy with the explanatory science-fictional element is a difficult one to pull off. But it seems not to worry most child readers. The sane child is probably at the far end of the spectrum from our friend to whom all beasts are dumb; to the child, we are all beasts together, and the distinction that bothers me is a quibble. In any case, Mr. O'Brien's rats are ratty, but not so ratty as Mr. Adams's rabbits are rabbity, because their civilisation is not indigenous and based upon native biology, but new and artificially engendered. They are, in fact, a new species; and their practical and ethical problems are therefore urgent and intense.